

# JACQUELINE WEAVER : Theory of Education

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“Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself.” – [John Dewey](#)

## **Relevance**

The great educational philosopher John Dewey said, “If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.” Although history is essential to any field of study, it would be a disservice to our students to ignore the power of our present circumstances. Students are searching for meaningful, relevant connections to their daily lives. By beginning with a contemporary point of view, students can immediately see the impact of the subject of study. From this place of hyper-relevance, we can then draw connections backward through time.

For example, as we grapple with current issues surrounding social justice such as the systematic annihilation and destruction caused by ISIS or more domestic issues surrounding immigration, we can readily identify feelings of anger, helplessness, confusion, apathy, ambivalence. What can be done? We can then examine a tradition of individuals from many fields-- visual art, literature, music, politics, education-- bearing witness and responding to social injustices. We see such responses in recent history with the genocide in Darfur or Rwanda, but we can then draw lines to preceding movements for justice, the civil rights movement, women's suffrage over a century ago, further back to the painters of the 1700-1800's foregoing the tradition of reserving paintings for the upper class or the church and instead, painting the working class as a subject of value despite the consequences. The lines can continue to be drawn backward, but by providing a contemporary context in which to view the subject, students can better understand the implications of the past.

Relevance also implies that as teachers, we continue to challenge our own learning experience to keep our curriculum current. If we want our students to push the boundaries of their field, we need to engage and involve them in what is happening now. It is important that student and teacher be an active part of the contemporary community in such a way that students will value and continue their involvement outside of the academic setting.

## **Connection**

From this contemporary standpoint, students can start to create a personal connection with the subject, and also notice the way the subject branches out to touch many other aspects of life. It is the mediation of the global and the personal connection that allows us to make a meaningful connection. This connection is the entry point for a love of learning. Education is a big picture, a web. Isolating a subject only limits the possibility for connection and relevance. Viewing each subject through an interdisciplinary lens strengthens all subjects.

In my field, contemporary art is tied to every subject, every topic, every global issue-- from environmentalism and spirituality to perceptions of time and consumerism. It is writing, dancing, assembling, experimenting, inventing, drawing from a wealth of sources. To overlook or minimize these connections is to limit the experience of the work.

## **Experience**

We learn by doing. We can study all the theory available or read every textbook written, but until we have a chance to apply our knowledge, we are stunted at a lower order thinking level. We are missing a crucial aspect of learning--experience. Whenever possible students should be active participants in their education. Whether it is making art, talking with professionals, organizing a theater production, visiting artist studios, collaborating on a real-world project- the experiences solidify or challenge the knowledge. It allows the knowledge come to life and cultivates the connection in a deeper, more meaningful way.

## **Community**

Education, like art, is a social endeavor. By creating a learning community, we are surrounding ourselves with many viewpoints, many skill sets, many strengths, many hands, and many ideas. This encourages a diverse environment in which we can accomplish much more than we might on our own.

As a teacher and a leader in this community, developing a personal connection with students is also important. I am passionate about my field. In my experience, people follow passion. This can set the tone for a dynamic and invested community of learners.

## **Critical and creative thinking**

Regardless of the field a student enters, we want to foster independent, critical and creative thinkers who are making innovative strides in their field. In the contemporary art world, we are continually employing cognitive skills that reach across fields--problem solving, analyzing, interpreting, synthesizing, reflecting, evaluating, revising. These critical thinking skills are a necessary part of being an informed and active participant in society. Individuals fluent in these practices become the leaders, explorers, and inventors.

## **Success**

I do not believe that everyone should be experts in every field; we are all unique. However, I do believe that the pursuit of excellence in any field results in success. I believe that this is something teachers have the ability to affect. Within one specific field, there can be many ways for students to find success, and they do not always manifest in the areas we might think.

An example of this that I see often in the art room concerns drawing. I have had many student who, by the unfortunate stereotype encouraged by many art teachers and parents, believe that because they cannot draw realistically, they are not an artist. Though drawing has traditionally been a measure of a student's technical ability upon entering college, there is a vast amount of contemporary art being made that has absolutely nothing to do with a student's ability to draw a still life realistically. I have found that many of my most promising students making the most interesting work, were not the best draughtsman. Instead they were better explorers, risk-takers, critical thinkers, and conceptualists. I have had many of these students come through my classroom, typically overlooked in the area of art, typically doubting their ability. By opening up the possibilities for students to find success in multiple arenas, we create a safe haven of exploration and discovery that is impossible within the rigid confines of a success measured by a single criteria.